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ABSTRACT

Much emphasis in the literature has been given to the idea that counselors can teach their clients self-management procedures and that through these procedures the clients can learn to solve their own problems. The concept of self-management as applied to the counselor education process and more specifically to the modification of counselor behaviors is discussed. The benefits of training counselors through self-management procedures are described. A specific plan that has been used with pre-practicum and practicum students is outlined. Each student is required to select some aspect of his or her counseling behavior and modify it according to the self-management plan. This plan suggests how a student can (1) identify a problem, (2) analyze the problem, (3) set a goal, (4) determine and implement a strategy, and (5) evaluate the project results. Three projects that students have completed are described. One project dealt with reducing the number of times the counselor used a meaningless filler in her speech. A second project concerned a student who wanted to ask fewer close ended questions and more open ended questions. The third project dealt with increasing the frequency of empathic responses. General student reactions to the self-management projects are also summarized. (Author)

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SELF-MANAGEMENT PROJECTS IN COUNSELOR EDUCATION

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Introduction

The idea of self-management has been discussed and written about for many years. Any bookstore which specializes in popular reading material has a section devoted to the subject of self-improvement of mind or body. A few examples which are readily available deal with weight loss, physical exercise, athletic skill development, writing proficiency, mental meditation, and interpersonal relationships. The underlying commonality of these guides is that they describe how the reader can modify some aspect of his own behavior *without* the direct assistance of professional consultation. The stress is on the reader's own ability to deal with a problem.

Counselors have traditionally focused their efforts on direct involvement with their clients. Only recently has there been a recognition that counselors might be more effective if they were to shift focus to teaching clients to modify their own behavior (Watson & Tharp, 1972; Thoresen & Mahoney, 1974; Nye, 1973; Boyd & LaFleur, 1974). Through this approach, clients are encouraged to learn systematic procedures which they are then able to apply to their own problems without professional help.

In this paper, the concept of self-management is carried a step further. It is proposed that learning about self-management procedures and going through the process of changing some aspect of behavior is an effective and efficient approach to counselor education. The counselor-in-training who learns about self-management procedures and goes through the change process himself benefits in several ways.

Benefits of Training Counselors Through Self-Management Procedures

Probably the most significant benefit is the actual experiencing of behavior change. Counselors are usually trained in the use of a specific technique such as behavioral contracting first, by reading about it; second, seeing a demonstration of a counselor employing it; and finally, trying it out with a client in practicum. In order to provide the counseling student with a more intimate knowledge of behavioral contracting, after reading about the procedure, the student would be encouraged to alter some aspect of his own behavior using contracting. A counselor who has actually employed behavioral contracting on himself and has felt what it is like to be under the restraints that are involved in meeting a contract is likely to have a deeper appreciation for the technique than someone who has merely read about it or seen it demonstrated.

Another benefit counseling students derive from learning about self-management has to do with the step-by-step counseling process. This process, which consists of the four steps of (1) problem analysis, (2) goal setting, (3) strategy determination and implementation, and (4) evaluation, is more or less common to most all counseling approaches. To the student who is somewhat unfamiliar with the steps, the activity of going through them with some problem of his own is a natural way in which to learn the counseling process.

A long range benefit of learning and experiencing self-management procedures is directly related to the growth and development of counselor skills after the training program is completed. Counselors who are presently graduating and moving into the counseling profession will be working during a period of rapid development in regard to counseling procedures. New counseling techniques and strategies are

proliferating. A self-management "outlook" can be a major factor in encouraging the counselor to be open-minded enough to change his counseling behavior to reflect newer and more effective techniques.

A Plan for Self-Management Projects in Counselor Education

Over the past three years as a teacher, the author has required a self-management project of counseling students in pre-practicum and practicum courses. The students select some aspect of their own behavior and modify it according to a project plan. In this plan, they are required to hand in three assignments over the ten week term. The first assignment consists of a statement and analysis of the problem. The problem statement is usually a sentence or two describing the general nature of the problem. Some examples might be,

a) In my counseling sessions, I ask too many questions. I want to ask fewer questions.

b) I have a tendency to ask too many close-ended questions. I want to ask more open-ended questions because they facilitate the counseling process.

c) I need to improve my skills at identifying client feeling states. In some interviews, major client feelings go unspecified by the client and myself.

d) I have a tendency never to share my own thoughts, ideas, and feelings with my clients. In some situations, this sharing would be helpful.

e) I overuse the phrase, "I was just thinking...."

The second part of the first assignment is the problem analysis. In this section, the student analyzes the problem in terms of some theory of behavior. Watson and Tharp (1972) and Thoresen and Mahoney (1974) provide complete descriptions of how problems can be analyzed relative to learning theory. The analysis should clearly describe the problem in terms of how it is presently maintained and possibly how it initially developed. Emphasis is placed on understanding how the problem is presently maintained because this information is most useful when developing strategies for changing the behavior.

The second major assignment consists of a goal statement, baseline data, and the strategy to be employed. The goals are stated in such a manner that at some point in time it can be determined precisely whether the goal is achieved. A goal statement that is open-ended and stated in vague language is impossible to evaluate. The following are pairs of similar goal statements. In each pair, one statement is vague and the other is precise.

Vague Goals	Precise Goals
a) I will ask fewer questions in my next three interviews.	a) I will ask no more than two questions during my next three interviews.

Vague Goals	Precise Goals
b) I will ask more open-ended questions.	b) I will ask two open-ended questions for every close-ended question during my next five counseling sessions.
c) By the end of the counseling practicum course, I will be sharing at least one of my feelings with my client in every interview.	c) In each of the last five interviews of the counseling practicum, I will share at least one of my feelings with my client.
d) During my next two counseling interviews, I will use no more than three canned expressions in each interview.	d) During my next two counseling interviews, I will use no more than three canned expressions in each interview. The canned expressions of interest are "I was just thinking...." "What sorts of things....?"

Baseline data are the data collected regarding the behavior of interest before the implementation of the strategy. In addition to the presentation of the data in graphical form, the counseling students are required to describe the method by which the data are collected. In most cases the behaviors of interest occur during counseling interviews. To facilitate the collection of these data, an audio-tape recording of the interview is made and played back at a later time when frequency counts can be made. Students are encouraged to define precisely the behavior of interest so as to increase the reliability of their data. In the ideal situation, the students would have objective raters collect the data from the tapes. In order to approximate this situation, students are encouraged to have other students collect the data for them.

The final part of the second assignment is a description of the strategy the student will employ. Students are encouraged to think of the strategy statement as a plan by which they will change their present behavior (problem statement and analysis) to some other behavior that is more desired (goal).

The third and final assignment consists of two parts. First, there is a description of the results of the project and a statement as to whether the goal was attained. Second, the students write reactions to the whole project experience. They are asked to respond to questions such as (1) What aspects of the project were successful? (2) What failed? (3) What could be done differently next time? (4) What did the student learn about himself or herself?

The evaluation of the three assignments is based on a pass/fail system. The pass or fail determination is made by the instructor based on several considerations. Some of these considerations are clarity of communication, correct application of theory, and appropriateness of strategy. Self-modification projects come in great variety, and it is difficult to establish an evaluation system that is entirely objective. In order to create a situation with as much potential learning as possible, students are allowed to turn in a given assignment as many times as needed in order to obtain a pass grade. When an assignment is turned in, and the teacher decides the assignment is not up to the "pass criteria," it is his responsibility to state precisely on the assignment what is required in order to make it a "pass."

Counseling Student Reactions to Self-Management Projects

The most common student reaction to doing self-management projects is that the experience emphasizes the important components of the counseling process. Most students feel that they have a solid understanding of the four basic elements of problem analysis, goal setting, strategy determination, and evaluation.

Another common reaction has to do with individual students learning of what strategies are effective with them and what strategies are not so effective. The actual experiencing of a strategy is often quite different from what the student expected. As an example, in many cases students established contingencies between the performance of some counseling behavior and some self-administered reward. Frequently, students learned that they could get along without the designated reward. There were enough other stimuli in the environment to make up for the loss of one reward. Another related example has to do with a token plan aimed at saving up for some final large reward. In many cases, the final large reward was too distant and did not perform as a true incentive.

Three Examples of Self-Management Projects

In the last section of this paper, three self-management projects which deal with counselor behaviors are described. Each of the projects was carried out by counseling students. On the first day of the counseling practicum course, the supervisor asked that the students listen to the first few tapes of their counseling and then select some aspect of their interview behavior for modification. The students were free to select any counseling behavior they felt needed modification. The three projects described here deal with an unconscious mannerism, open and close ended questions, and empathic responses.

In the first project, the student was interested in reducing the number of times she said "uh" in her counseling sessions. After listening to the first three of her practicum tapes, she noted that she used "uh" as a filler during interview silences and as a link between two sentences. She disliked the mannerism and decided to reduce the frequency of it. Baseline data showed that during the first three interviews for each five minutes, she emitted the target behavior, "uh," on an average of three times (see Figure 1). This data was collected by another

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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practicum student who listened to a randomly selected five minute segment from each of the first three interviews.

The student determined that a reasonable goal would be to reduce the average number of times she said "uh" to one-half of the frequency obtained in the baseline period over the next six interviews (interviews four through nine). This goal implied that she would have to average no more than one and one-half "uh" statements per five minutes in any interview.

During interviews four, five, and six, she applied a treatment plan. Interviews seven, eight, and nine served as a reversal period in which there was no

treatment. The treatment plan employed a combination of covert rehearsal and a cueing procedure. The covert rehearsal involved a quiet period before each interview in which she mentally went over the purpose of the self-management project. The cueing procedure involved having a notebook in the interview which was open to a page that had "UH" written in big letters at the top.

It can be seen in Figure 1 that the average frequency of the target response during the treatment phase was 0.33. During the reversal phase the frequency was 0.66. These results indicate that she clearly met her goal.

The second self-management project described here deals with the types of questions counselors ask. The student wanted to ask more open-ended questions and fewer close-ended questions. Close-ended questions encourage the client to respond in a specific and short manner. Examples are: "What is the name of your teacher?" "Where do you live?" and "When did you have the discussion?" Open-ended questions encourage more expansive responses on the part of the client. Examples of open-ended questions are: "What happened next?" "Can you tell me about the incident?" and "Can you describe your relationship?"

During the first ten minutes of the first four interviews in practicum the student was asking one open-ended question for every 3.3 close-ended questions. All the data for this project was collected from audiotapes by a fellow student. Figure 2 shows this comparison between open-ended and close-ended questions in the baseline section. The student decided that her goal for the project would be to

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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ask one open-ended question for every close-ended question during the first ten minutes in the last four interviews in practicum.

As a strategy designed to help her reach the goal, she decided if the ratio of open-ended questions to close-ended questions was greater than 1/3.3 for a given week's interviews, she would reward herself by eating one meal out. Figure 2 shows the results of the strategy for interviews five through seventeen. During that period of time, the ratio of open-ended questions to close-ended questions was 1/1.3. Unfortunately, the self-management project results were handed in before she had the last four interviews of the term. The last four interviews came after interview number seventeen. The data represented in Figure 2 shows, however, that she made substantial progress toward the goal of one open-ended question for every close-ended question.

In the third project, the student attempted to increase the frequency of empathic responses and decrease the frequency of non-empathic questions during the first three minutes of her interviews. A non-empathic question was defined as any question the counselor asked that did not deal with feelings. All data collection in this project was carried out by a fellow student in order to encourage objectivity. During the baseline period (interviews one through four), the student averaged one empathic response for each 16 non-empathic questions. (See Figure 3.) She decided that her goal would be to change this ratio of 1:16 to 3:2 for interviews five through eight and to 5:1 for interviews nine through twelve. During

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Insert Figure 3 about here

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interviews five through eight, she incorporated a treatment plan that involved brainstorming feeling words with pencil and paper for ten minutes the night before scheduled interviews. After the brainstorming session, she also practiced empathic responses for an additional five minutes. This treatment was terminated after interview number eight.

During interviews five through eight, she had a ratio of 18 empathic responses to 17 non-empathic questions (see Figure 3). This ratio did not meet her goal of 3:2. It appears she would have achieved the goal had it not been for the many non-empathic questions she asked in interview five. In the reversal phase, her ratio of empathic responses to non-empathic questions was 5:8 which again did not meet her goal of 5:1. The student indicated that she was disappointed in not achieving her goals, but that she did feel she was making definite improvement in empathy skills.

In addition to the three projects described above, other self-management projects have been carried out by counseling students. The following is a partial list of the counseling behaviors that have modified:

1. Reduce the use of modifiers for feeling words (e.g., kinda scared, sort of angry, etc.).
2. Make empathy responses in the form of statements rather than questions.
3. Reduce the frequency of references to self.
4. Reduce the use of "fillers" (e.g., ahh..., mm..., etc.).
5. Reduce the frequency of mimic responses.
6. Reduce the occurrences of interrupting clients.
7. Reduce the frequency of stopping in the middle of sentences.
8. Reduce the amount of inaudible communication.

Conclusions

The idea of training counselors through self-management procedures is a new one and untested by research. It seems that there are several benefits to be derived from such an approach. The great variety of counseling behaviors that can be modified through this approach is indicative of its flexibility and possibilities of wide application.

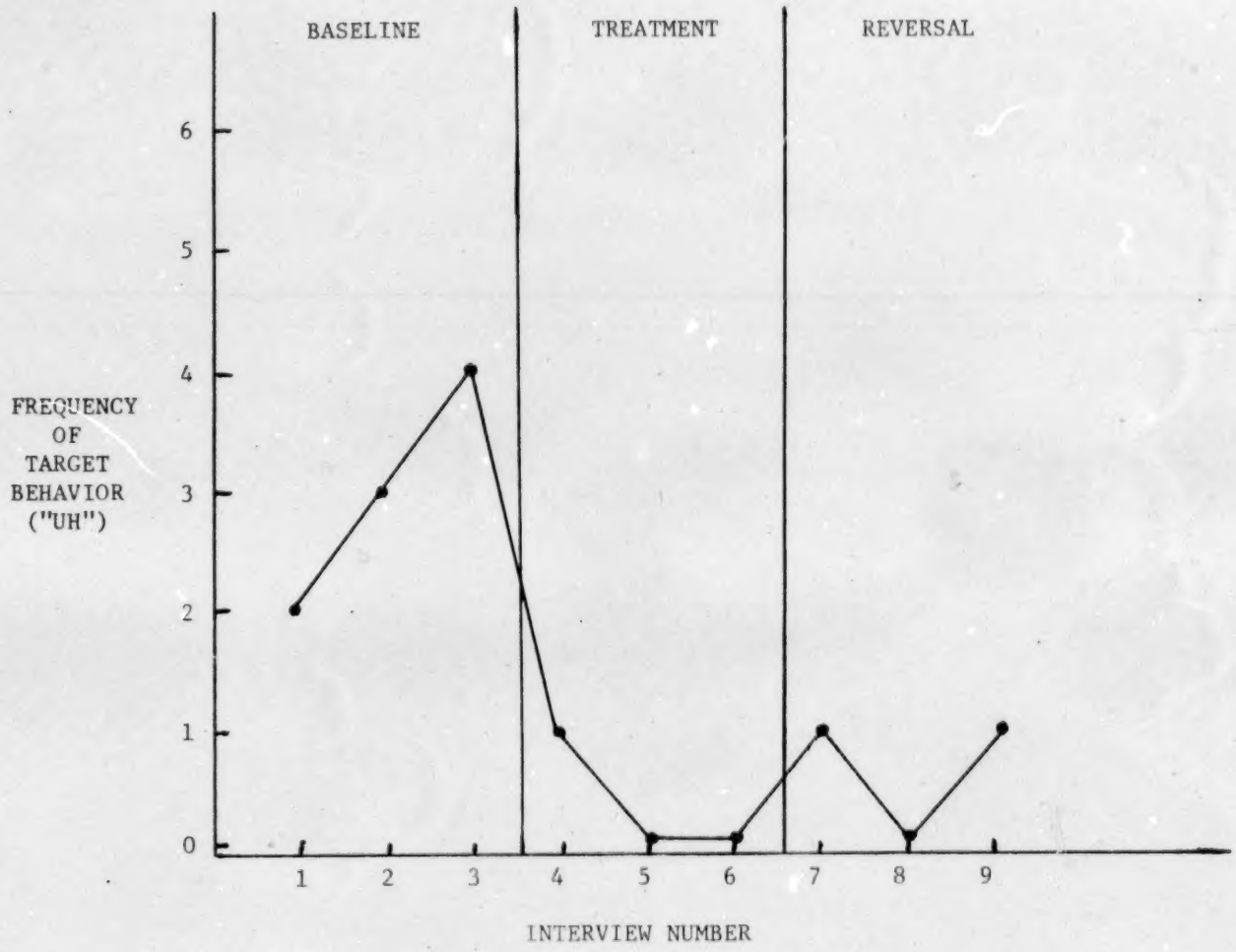

Figure 1. Number of counselor "uh" statements made during randomly selected five minute segments.

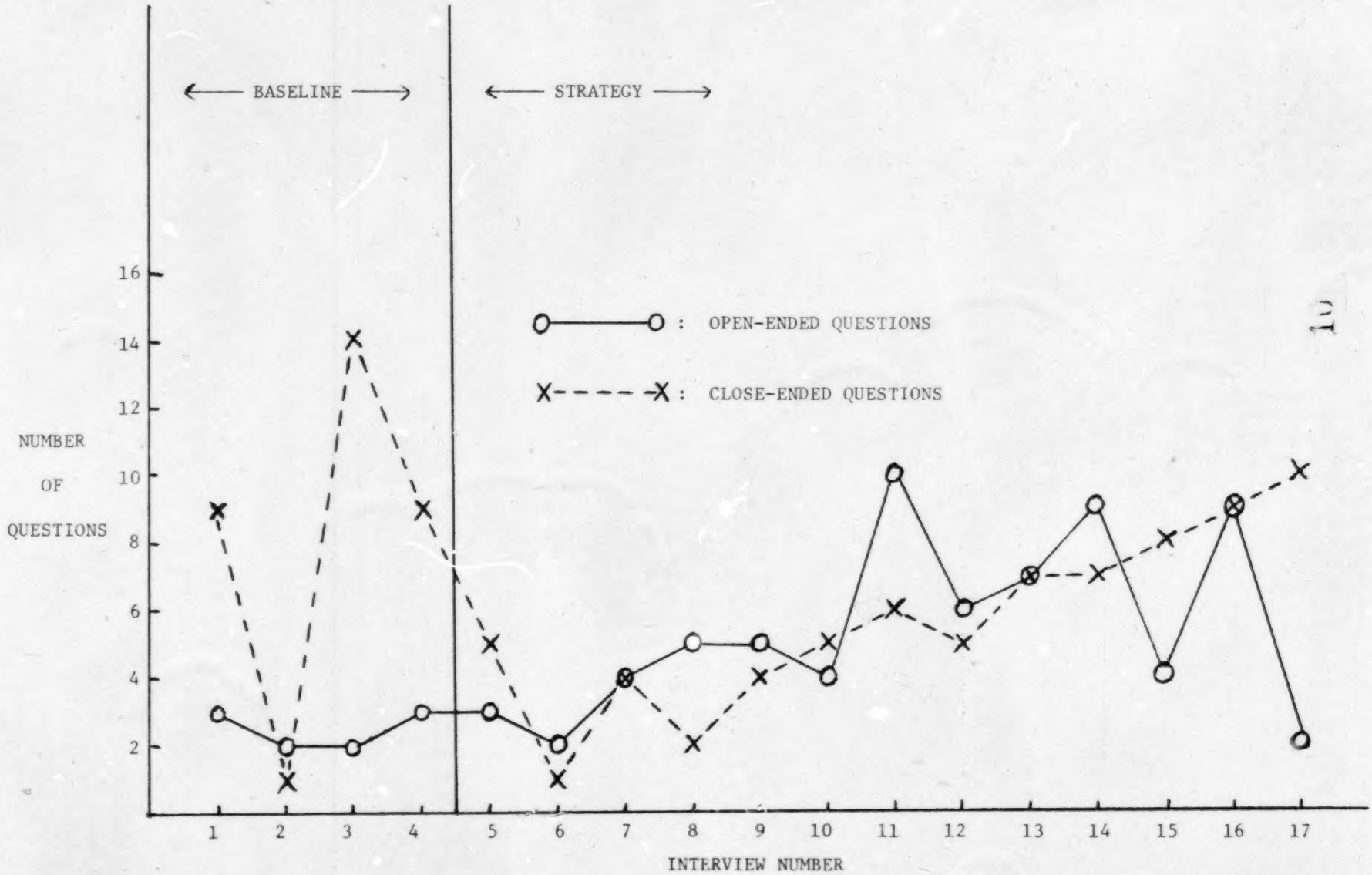

Figure 2. Number of open and closed questions asked by counselor during first ten minutes of interviews.

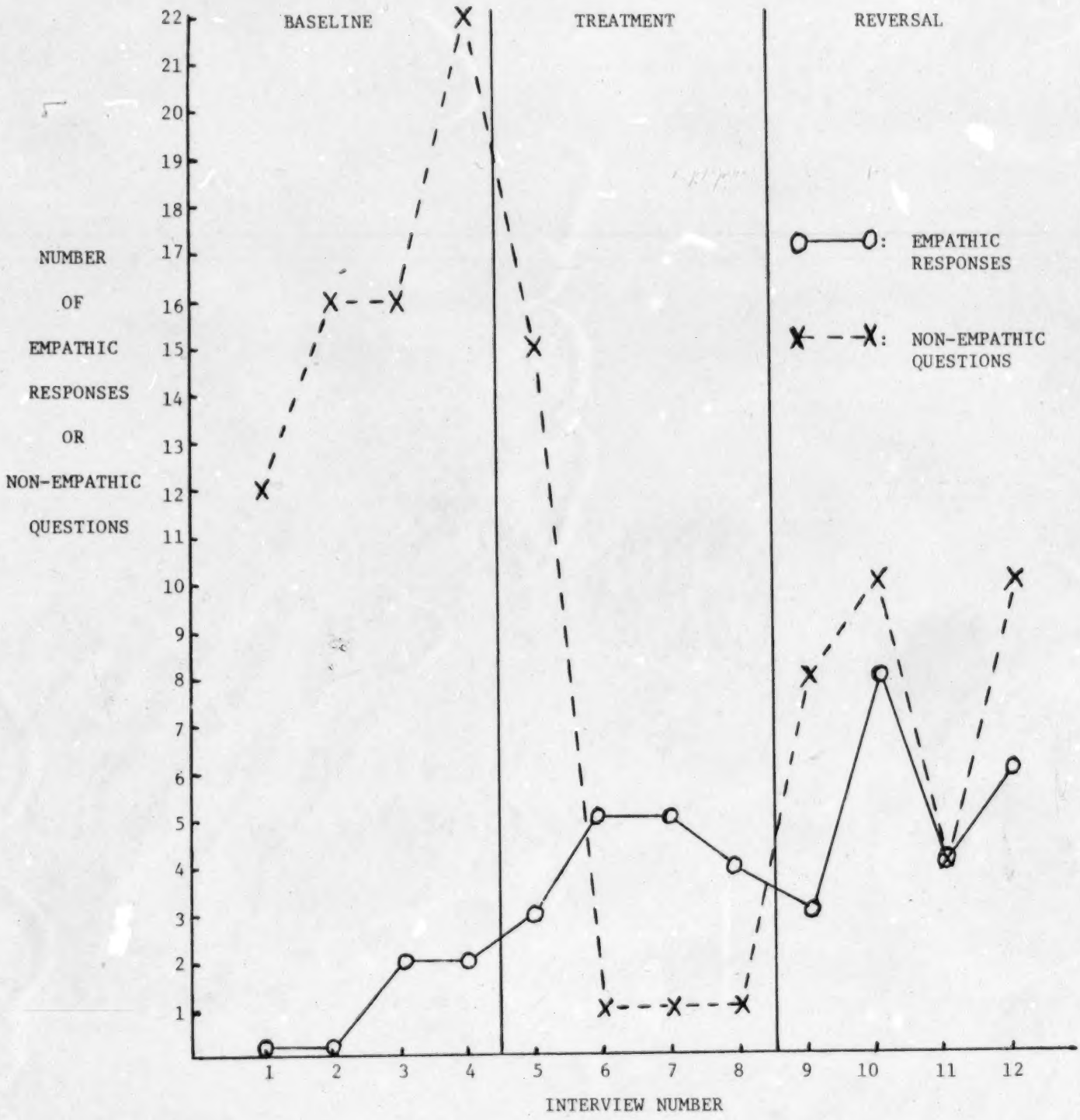

Figure 3. Number of counselor empathic responses and non-empathic questions during first three minutes of interviews.

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